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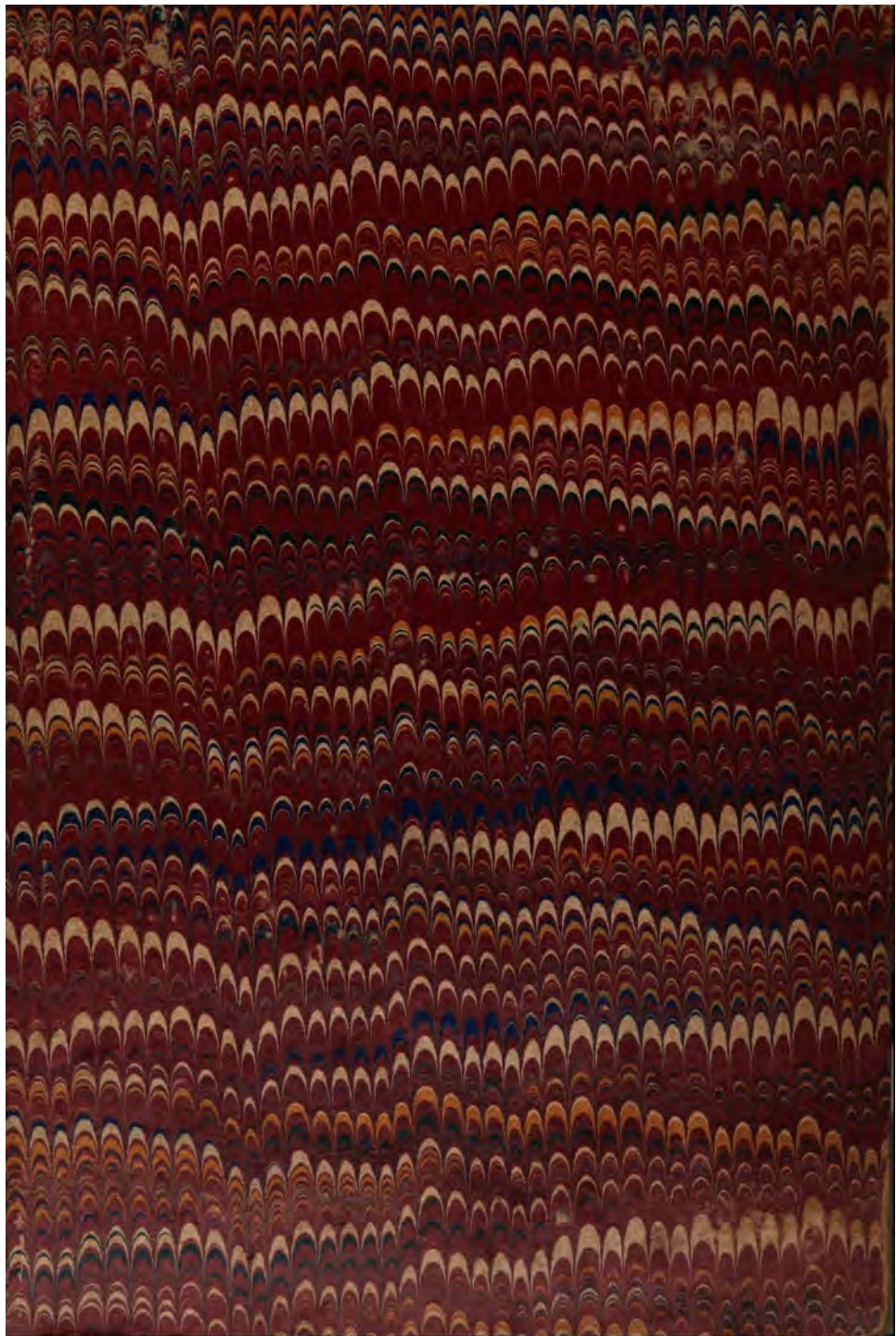
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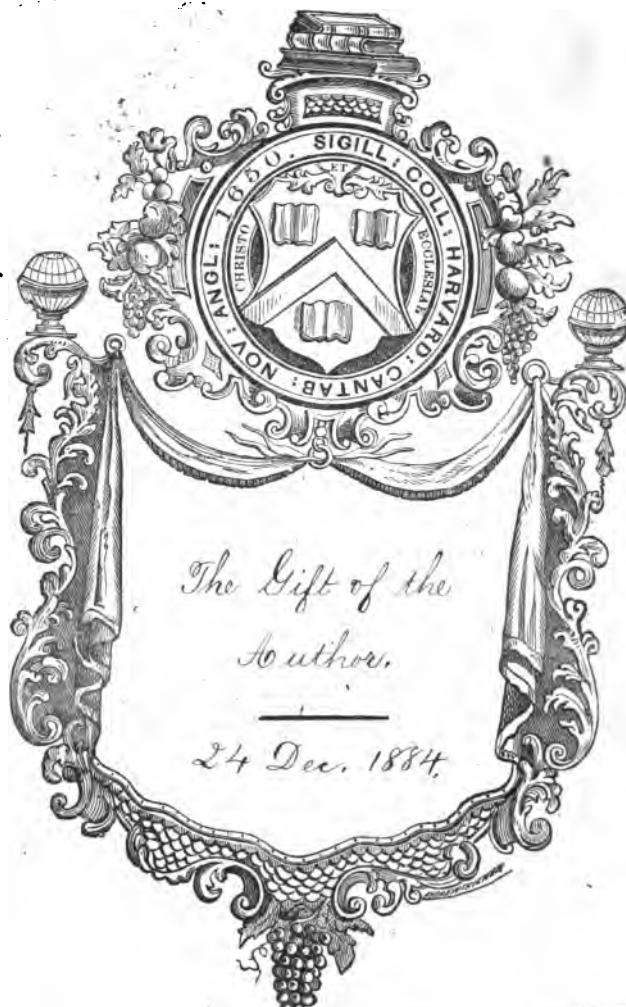
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THE ELECTION

First Bishop of CONNECTICUT.

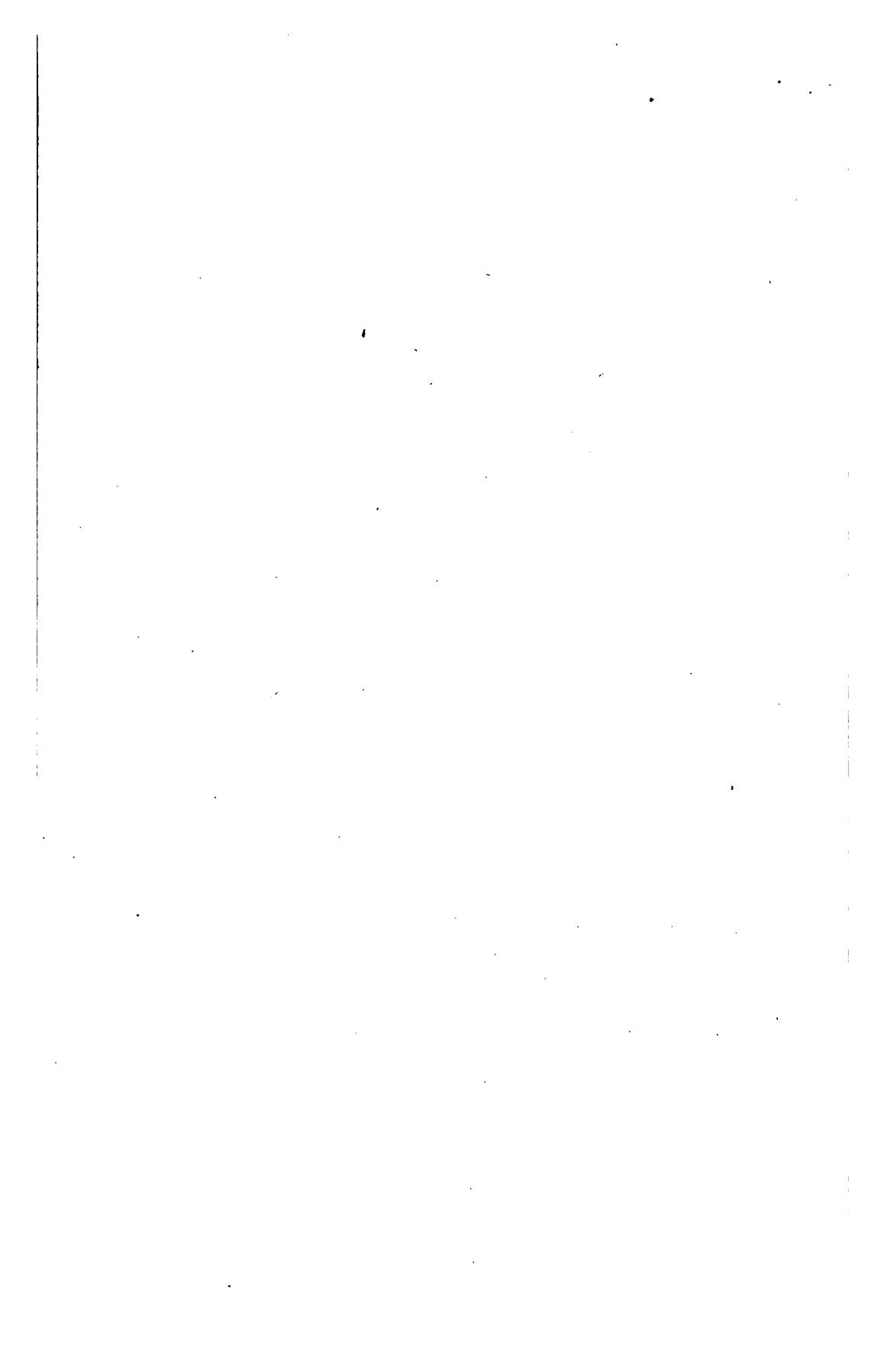
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BY THE REV. JAMES W. THOMAS, D.D.

THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

WITH A HISTORY OF THE CHURCH.

BY JAMES W. THOMAS,
REV. D. D.



THE ELECTION

OF THE

FIRST BISHOP OF CONNECTICUT,

AT WOODBURY,

ON THE FEAST OF THE ANNUNCIATION, 1783.

An Historical Review.

BY

WILLIAM STEVENS PERRY,

HISTORIOGRAPHER
OF THE AMERICAN CHURCH.



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INTRODUCTORY NOTE.

Some time has elapsed since the appearance, first in "The Living Church" newspaper, of Chicago, Illinois, and subsequently in a privately-printed pamphlet, of the Rev. Dr. Beardsley's paper on the "Choice by the Clergy of the First Bishop of Connecticut." The object of this essay was to controvert certain statements respecting the election of Seabury made by the writer in the newspaper already referred to, in connection with the publication of a sketch of Bishop Seabury's life. Dr. Beardsley's pamphlet was followed by the publication of a discourse delivered by the Rev. Dr. W. J. Seabury, Professor in the General Theological Seminary of New York, entitled "The Election in Order to Consecration of the First Bishop of Connecticut, on the Feast of the Annunciation, 1783." This publication, which was temperate in tone and logical and convincing in argument, was inspired by the fact that "the proceeding" at Woodbury "has at times been referred to in language which apparently, although perhaps only in appearance, partakes of a spirit which has rendered honor to the distinguished object of it, not cheerfully, but, as it were, grudgingly, and of necessity; language which not so much raises the question whether that proceeding was an election, as assumes that question to have been decided in the negative."* With the publication of this discourse and the appearance of a sermon on "The Election of Bishop Seabury," by the Rev. Prof. Hart, of Trinity College, the discussion of the "election" was for the time suspended. The writer, whose statements had

* Professor Seabury's Discourse, pp. 21, 22.

occasioned criticism and given rise to the controversy, was at the time absent from home, and on his return was too busily occupied in other duties to give the subject the attention it required. The revival of interest in everything pertaining to the life of the first Bishop of Connecticut, in connection with the centenary celebration of his consecration at Aberdeen, in London, in Hartford, in New York, at Faribault, Davenport, and elsewhere, has seemed to him a fitting time for a calm review of the whole discussion, and, avoiding all reference to personalities unnecessarily connected with this discussion in its earlier stages, he begs for the following paper the careful consideration of all who revere the character and admire the life of the first American Bishop.

BISHOP'S HOUSE,
DAVENPORT, IOWA,
November 14, 1884.

THE ELECTION OF THE FIRST BISHOP OF CONNECTICUT.

THE circumstances attending the election of the first Bishop of Connecticut are thus referred to by Jarvis, the Secretary of the Woodbury Convention and the successor of Seabury in the Episcopate:

"In the year one thousand seven hundred and eighty-three, as the war with Great Britain was drawing near to a close, while we were unable to confer with our brethren in the other States, but anxious to take the earliest and most effectual measures our best discernment could suggest, to procure a valid Episcopate, on which, under God, the continuance and enjoyment of our religious profession would probably depend, the clergy of this State agreed to elect some person to be invested with that important office. Two persons occurred to our minds, Doctor Leaming and Doctor Seabury. The former, by his amiable life among us and excellent services, merited our affections, esteem, and confidence; he had a just claim to our attention, and was our first choice. Debility and the many bodily infirmities under which he then labored, caused him to decline, as altogether unfitted for an enterprise that required great vigor and firmness of mind. These were conspicuous in Doctor Seabury, who, in every other respect also, was the man to our wishes. He accepted our choice, and without delay undertook to carry our desires into effect," etc.*

* From a Discourse delivered before the Special Convention at New Haven, May 5th, 1796.

The slightest examination of the above is enough to convince the unprejudiced reader that Mr. Jarvis had in mind, when he speaks of Mr. Leaming as the “first choice” of the clergy, not the “formal election” at Woodbury—for such we claim it was, notwithstanding assertions to the contrary—but the general sentiment and desire existing in the minds of Connecticut Churchmen, both clerical and lay, when the selection of a Bishop was first contemplated. There never has been a question but that the clergy of Connecticut, and the laity as well, regarded good Mr. Leaming as in every respect, save in years and physical infirmities, worthy of the Episcopate. That he was the first one thought of in this connection is fully conceded. As to this fact tradition and history are in accord. But the assertion that at the Woodbury Convention he was the “first choice,” and Seabury only an “alternate,” is quite as unsupported by documentary evidence as is the further statement that this selection was made “without a formal election,” a statement directly at variance, as we shall see, with the assertion of Leaming himself, and Jarvis, Hubbard, and John R. Marshall, the incumbent at Woodbury.

We have brief but explicit notices of the proceedings at Woodbury from the pen of one who was a member of the Convention, present at its sessions, and who wrote his concise and cautious, yet clear,

reports as soon after the meeting occurred as it was deemed safe or expedient to reveal what had transpired. The hurried letters addressed by the Rev. Daniel Fogg, of Pomfret, to his correspondent at Boston, the Rev. Samuel Parker, evidently written in reply to queries occasioned by rumors then rife, afford us the only contemporary account of the proceedings at Woodbury, so far as the choice of the first American Bishop is concerned. They graphically depict the fear felt by the clergy lest the old opposition to an American Episcopate, so general among the colonists before the Revolution, might again be aroused, and serve to defeat their cherished plans, on which, as they rightly believed, the very being of the Church in this land depended.

POMFRET, July 2d, 1783.

REV. SIR:— There were ten clergymen met. The Connecticut clergy have done already everything in their power, in the matter you were anxious about. Would send you the particulars if I knew of any safe opportunity of sending this letter; but as I do not, must defer it till I do.

Your sincere friend and brother,

D. FOGG.*

In less than a fortnight another letter revealed more in detail the news so full of interest to Mr. Parker and the waiting, wondering Churchmen of Massachusetts:

* From the original, in the possession of the writer.

POMFRET, July 14th, 1783.

DEAR SIR:— I wrote you a few lines the 2d inst., by an uncertain conveyance, in which I mentioned that the Connecticut clergy had done all in their power respecting the matter you were anxious about; but they kept it a profound secret, even from their most intimate friends of the laity.

The matter is this: After consulting the clergy in New York how to keep up the succession, they unanimously agreed to send a person to England to be consecrated Bishop for America, and pitched upon Dr. Seabury as the most proper person for this purpose, who sailed for England the beginning of last month, highly recommended by all the clergy in New York and Connecticut, etc. If he succeeds, he is to come out as missionary for New London, or some other vacant mission; and if they will not receive him in Connecticut, or any other of the *States of America*, he is to go to Nova Scotia. Sir Guy [Sir Guy Carleton, Commander-in-Chief of all His Majesty's forces in America,] highly approves of the plan, and has used all his influence in favor of it.

The clergy have even gone so far as to instruct Dr. Seabury, if none of the regular Bishops of the Church of England will ordain him, to go down to Scotland and receive ordination from a nonjuring Bishop. Please let me know, by Mr. Grosvenor, how you approved of the plan, and whether you have received any late accounts from England.

From your affectionate brother,

D. FOGG.*

A little later, and evidently in answer to some expressions of doubt as to the wisdom of selecting so pronounced a “refugee” as Dr. Seabury for an American Episcopate, Mr. Fogg writes as follows:

* From the original, in the possession of the writer.

DEAR SIR:—I am very glad that the conduct of the Connecticut clergy meets with your approbation in the main. Dr. Seabury's being a refugee was an objection which I made, but was answered, they could not fix on any other person who they thought was so likely to succeed as he was, and should he succeed, and not be permitted to reside in any of the United States, it would be an easy matter for any other gentleman, who was not obnoxious to the *powers that be*, to be consecrated by him at Halifax. And as to the objection of not consulting the clergy of the other States, the time would not allow of it, and there was nobody to consult in the State of New York, except refugees, and they were consulted. And in the State of Connecticut there are fourteen clergymen. And in your State and New Hampshire, you know how many there are, and you know there is no compulsion in the matter, and you will be left to act as you please, either to be subject to him or not. As to the matter of his support, that must be an after consideration.

Your affectionate friend and brother,

D. FOGG.*

POMFRET, August 1st, 1783.

It will be seen that Fogg makes no reference to any "first choice" of Leaming at the Woodbury meeting; and his language is clearly at variance with the idea that Seabury was in any sense an "alternate." That there was discussion is evident. That there was earnest and solemn deliberation is clear; but, so far as Fogg's evidence is concerned, and it is the only contemporary testimony we have, it would sustain the assertion that Leaming—whose

* From the original, in the possession of the writer.

“debility and many infirmities” were known to all, and who might well be regarded, in consequence, as “altogether unfitted for an enterprise that required great vigor and firmness of mind”—was the “alternate,” and not Seabury, who is expressly said to have been “pitched upon . . . as the most proper person” to send “to England to be consecrated.” And this we believe to have been the case, after a careful examination of all the papers, in manuscript or in print, within our reach which in any way bear upon the question.

The existence of a discarded draft of a letter, prepared by the provident Jarvis for use in the event of Seabury’s unwillingness or inability to accept the appointment, is no proof of the priority of Mr. Leaming’s choice at Woodbury. Its reference to “his age and infirmities” as confessed objections on his part to his considering such an “enterprise,” and its acknowledgment of the “force” of these objections, are sufficiently deprecatory to prove that his recommendation to England could have been considered solely in the light of a forlorn hope. We are expressly told that the clergy convened at Woodbury “could not fix on any other person who they thought was so likely to succeed” as Seabury; and evidently it could have been only in the event of Seabury’s refusal that one less “likely to succeed,” and whose “age and infirmities” were obstacles they

“felt the force of,”* would have been expected “to encounter the fatigues and dangers of such a voyage,” for which he was conscious that he was “altogether unfitted.” That there was consultation in New York we do not question, but while the certainty of Leaming’s inability in any event to undertake the “enterprise” may have quickened Seabury’s resolution to accept his election, every fact points to the conclusion that Leaming, and not Seabury, was considered in the light of the “alternate.” Besides, the language of the clergy in officially addressing their Diocesan on his return from Scotland, invested with the Episcopal office, explicitly speaks of Seabury as their “elected Bishop,” “by their voluntary and united suffrages;” and this choice, appointment, election, or whatever these words imply, they state was “signified” to him “by Mr. Jarvis first at New York, in April, 1783.”† What explanation can be given to this language, formally and

* The unused draft provided by Jarvis, the “Secretary to the Convention,” thus reads: “The gentleman we beg leave to present to your Grace is the Rev. Mr. ——, the Society’s worthy Missionary at ——. His age and infirmities we confess are objections on his part we felt the force of. His yielding to our desires to encounter the fatigues and dangers of such a voyage, which (free from motives of personal ambition, for which in our situation there is very little temptation) nothing but a zeal almost primitive would lead him to do, much the more endears him to us. He is indeed a tried servant of the Church, and carries about him in a degree the marks of a confessor.”—*Memoir of Bishop Jarvis, in “The Evergreen” for 1846.*

† *Vide* the Address, etc., of the Episcopal Clergy to Bishop Seabury, at Middletown, August 3, 1785 (Hawks and Perry’s Connecticut Church Documents, Vol. II., p. 264).

officially used and subscribed by Leaming, Jarvis, Bela Hubbard, and John R. Marshall, the Woodbury missionary, if not that which is confirmed by Fogg's testimony that Seabury was formally elected by the Woodbury Convention, and that this election was "signified" to him in New York by Jarvis, provision having been made, in the event of his refusal, to send Leaming, despite his "age and infirmities?" Why is it necessary to reverse the natural order of this election, attested by Fogg, asserted over Leaming's and Jarvis's signatures, and congruous with the good sense of the Connecticut clergy, who cannot be supposed by their "voluntary and united suffrages" to have "elected Bishop" both Seabury and Leaming? Certainly, this is sacrificing too much merely to sustain an unnecessary and unwarranted inference drawn from Jarvis's use, years afterwards, of the phrase "our first choice," or the traditional statements, to the same effect, made by Ashbel Baldwin and Reuben Ives to the Historian of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut, neither of these excellent clergymen being at Woodbury, or even in orders, at the time of these occurrences.

With this presentation of the facts of the choice by the clergy of Connecticut of their first Bishop we reproduce and reaffirm the statements made some time since in connection with the publication in a Church newspaper of a series of papers on the life of

Bishop Seabury. The statements to which we refer are as follows:

The importance of the Fogg Letters may be understood from the fact that but for them many erroneous representations respecting the choice of the first Bishop of Connecticut could never have been corrected, nor could the true history of this important measure have been known. It should be borne in mind that Mr. Fogg makes no reference to the alleged first choice of Mr. Leaming, of which we have, in fact, no *direct contemporary evidence*, whatever may be said to the contrary. The testimony of Mr. Fogg is clear, that "the most proper person for this purpose," in the minds of the Connecticut clergy, was Dr. Seabury, the one "pitched upon" by the Convention. The fact that there was consultation — Mr. Jarvis with Mr. Leaming and Dr. Seabury, of New York, to which Bishop Seabury refers in his letter to the Venerable Society, of the 27th of February, 1785, — does not warrant the assertion that the appointment was first offered to Mr. Leaming. In fact, whatever the abilities and excellence of good Mr. Leaming may have been, and we would be the last to deprecate them, the standing of Dr. Seabury, which had for years been among the first of the colonial clergy, was, now that Dr. Inglis was about to leave for the Provinces, confessedly unequaled by any. We doubt not that the grave question whether he should undertake this mission, fraught with difficulties, and promising but a tardy success, if that success should be at last attained, was one that made the stout heart of Seabury quail. Evidently, it was the wish of the Connecticut clergy, should he decline the choice, that the amiable Leaming should undertake it — *Proximus sed longo intervallo*; but we claim that Seabury's modesty in reference to this matter, and his evident wish to obey the apostolic precept, "in honor preferring one another," by his courteous allusion to the name which may

have been joined with his, is not to be distorted to prove that Mr. Leaming was in any formal way the "first choice," or that the "appointment was first offered" especially to him. We do not believe, from a careful study both of the man, the documents, and times, that Dr. Seabury would ever have crossed the ocean as an applicant for the Episcopate, if he had been but the second choice, and last resort. The language of Mr. Fogg's third letter renders it clear that any action respecting Mr. Leaming was at least an afterthought, and only thought of at all in view of Seabury's possible declination.

This view of the election of Seabury is no "mere theory." The writer does not purpose to put "his fancy against facts," and certainly during a residence of five years in Connecticut he had the opportunity and the desire "to learn her true history and traditions." It is to the documents of the time that he appeals in proof of the assertion that Seabury was the choice of the Convention at Woodbury as Bishop of Connecticut, and was formally "elected Bishop" by the "voluntary and united suffrages" of the Connecticut clergy at a "voluntary Convention" competent for the transaction of such solemn business, and that this choice was the deliberate, formal "act of the Connecticut clergy."

